SOLEC 2004

Discussion Session Summary Form

(to be completed by session recorder or facilitator)

Breakout Session (title): Resource Utilization

Number of Participants: 8 (excluding facilitator and note taker)

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SESSION HIGHLIGHTS

1. Diversity of the group (representatives of industry, academia- ethics student and economics student, power generation)

2. General agreement of the importance of social and resource indicators, and the need to develop and refine them under the SOLEC umbrella.

3. One theme was the need for a highly integrated indicator of Great Lakes Basin sustainability, such as ecological footprint analysis. The concept of urban metabolism was also discussed as a potential way to integrate mobile and diffuse sources

HIGHLIGHTS OF FEEDBACK ON INDICATOR ASSESSMENTS and BUNDLE ASSESSMENTS

The assessment of mixed is difficult to interpret from the management standpoint, because there will always be good points and bad points.

The economic prosperity indicator was discussed at great length, including a brainstorming session to propose other components the indicator may need to include. The indicator as currently defined was seen as valuable by some participants, but many felt that it needed broadening and further refinement.

A common theme was that disaggregating some of the indicators would be very helpful.

Specific comments and suggestions for the individual indicators discussed during the breakout session are summarized here.

Commercial/Industrial Eco-Efficiency (Indicator 3514)

Tracking the 25 largest employers is a good start, but participants felt that a greater number and variety of businesses need to be included (i.e. small and medium enterprises). Also, explore ways to capture large employers that are not yet reporting eco-efficiency.
An assessment of eco-efficiency across different economic sectors could also be illustrative. Efficiency is important, but overall production is just as important:

Economic Prosperity (Indicator 7043)

Participants agreed that this indicator needs to be reworked, with a more robust definition and data for the entire basin. The group debated the relevance of unemployment data to economic prosperity. If the economy is prosperous and at full employment, does that create greater impacts on the environment?

Many felt the indicator needed to address sustainability, not just prosperity (hence, the need for a high-level, integrated indicator, such as ecological footprint analysis).

A list of ideas was generated that could be useful in future discussions (available from SOLEC organizers). Measuring economic health is an endpoint in itself, so the key for this indicator is the ecosystem context.

Water Withdrawal (Indicator 7056)

Both water quantity and water quality were discussed. Suggestions included:
- -change the indicator title to Water Consumption (to reflect exports of water out of the basin by baby food manufacturers, breweries, etc.)
- -split the indicator up, and include water consumption as a metric

Energy Consumption (Indicator 7057)

Several participants agreed that this indicator is useful. Suggestions included:
- Revise the purpose statement
- Consider using several indicators within energy consumption (to address consumption, renewable vs. non-renewable sources, and conservation)
- Focus on the heavy cost of depletion of non-renewable energy sources
- Create an indicator of total carbon release (i.e. carbon released in BTU)

Solid Waste Generation (Indicator 7060)

Several areas were noted that the indicator did not address. First, it lacks data on the amount of material recycled, reused, and regenerated.
It might be relevant to mention hazardous waste here, and refer to other pertinent SOLEC indicators (possibly the contaminants bundle). One participant commented on the hazardous waste disposal as an ethical issue (they believed that there are two hazardous waste landfills in the basin, one in NY and the other in MI).

HIGHLIGHTS OF MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

There may be a need to consult others with economic expertise, who may not have been part of the SOLEC process before, such as statistics professionals from other agencies, industry representatives from the full range (small to international), etc.

Several voices emphasized the need to continue working on capturing energy issues: i.e. the need to reduce dependence on fossil fuels, increase reliance on renewables, etc.

Given the possibilities for reducing our ecosystem stresses by focusing on these types of indicators, this bundle of indicators merits more attention.

MEMORABLE QUOTES

"Given that these may be among the most important indicators in the basin, perhaps it's disadvantageous that no attention was given over the last two years to these indicators. We heard about symptoms this morning (from Bill Rees), and some of the negative trends… here are the causes. These are the things we can work to change."

On the importance of the societal indicators-- "We need to stop looking from the shore to the middle of the lake, and get a boat and look from the lake to the shore."

"We should focus on improvements in eco-efficiency, not just the reporting. We're learning to crawl before we can walk. We need to see how we can make use of these [indicators] before we can move forward to next version."

Referring to the Great Lakes Commission meeting-- "People need succinct reports, they need a page or less - this is where indicators come in. Science and policy sides push to compress the information so it can be used. But we end up with a whole line of "mixed" on a rainbow chart (because it's so compressed and aggregated). In the end, what does it really mean?"